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Rescuing Culture from “Cultural Appropriation”

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Daniel J. Mahoney

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References to “culture” are omnipresent in contemporary discourse, even as the word has lost almost all coherence. A word that used to refer to the demanding cultivation of the human mind and soul is today synonymous with almost any social practice (however low or degraded). One speaks freely of the rock culture, the drug culture, and many things worse. Rare are those who recognize that a salutary respect for cultural pluralism, for genuine human diversity, does not demand relativism or an abdication of moral judgment. How did we arrive at such a troubling situation?

To begin with, as the political philosopher Leo Strauss suggested many years ago, culture has ceased to be an “absolute” and has instead become identified with indiscriminate relativism. We have all become vulgar “anthropologists” enthralled by diversity as an end in itself—and the relativism that too often accompanies it. Strauss provocatively sums up the dominant view: “Every human being outside of lunatic asylums is a cultured human being, for he participates in a culture.” One is led to ask: What happened to the high and the low, and everything in between? What happened to the civilized capacity to discriminate between better and worse ways of life?

The urbanity, civility, high-mindedness, and generosity associated with genuine human cultivation has given way to a view that every human practice is worthy of our respect. Culture is thus trivialized. Eating a burrito or wearing a sombrero if one is not Mexican, or practicing yoga if one is not Indian, can become a source of controversy for those who think about culture in a reductive and relativistic way. (And as we know, the PC police are everywhere on our college campuses.) Respect for the specificity of culture supposedly demands an identity politics where people close in on themselves in the most narrow, prickly, and ungenerous manner. Any notion of common humanity is quickly

erased and the unreflective practices of any group become sacrosanct and beyond criticism (or even imitation and admiration).

Genuine Respect

What does all this ideological posturing have to do with respect for genuine human culture? We need not reject a respect for the dignity and special paths blazed by the world's high cultures to recognize that the best thought and art belongs to man as man. Plato, Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, Mozart, Beethoven, belong to all thoughtful and discerning souls and not just to those in the West (and the same can surely be said in principle about the best thought and art of the East). These classics enrich the human spirit and are not *reducible* to the cultures that undeniably shaped their formation and aspirations. High cultures and civilizations enrich each other even as they enrich the human spirit.

The classics of world literature, for example, enrich national literature without in any way homogenizing human thought and experience. Think of the peaks of Russian literature. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn are undeniable expressions of the Russian soul and give searing expression to both the Russian and the human condition. But who could say that *The Brothers Karamazov*, *War and Peace*, *Doctor Zhivago*, and *The Gulag Archipelago* (very Russian books all) can only speak to Russians as Russians? As Solzhenitsyn argued in his [Nobel lecture](#), literary art of a high order has the capacity, if anything does, to convey the experience of one people and nation to another, to overcome the nearsightedness and shortsightedness that is coextensive with the human condition. Dostoevsky wrestles with the temptation of moral nihilism; Tolstoy, the fog of war and the vicissitudes of history; Pasternak, the fate of decent men in a great nation and culture mutilated by fanatic revolutionaries. Solzhenitsyn chronicles the soul of man, holding on to dear life, under ideological tyranny and the inhuman reign of the Lie.

These books must be read by all cultivated and reflective human beings. They are precious acquisitions for East and West, for all those who wrestle with the human condition as well as the dark shadows that accompany modernity. We need to reflect on the intersection of the universal and the particular that defines our humanity rather than trying to be either “citizens of the World” or practitioners of an identity politics that demands that every “racial, gender, or sexual group . . . stick with their own culture and people and not allow themselves to be diluted by outsiders,” as the British journalist Brendan O'Neill has nicely put it. The latter understanding of culture—a set of practices, however banal, that are simply our own and are valued for that reason alone—has lost all connection with higher intellectual, cultural, or spiritual aspirations. If culture means anything at all, it ought to mean the self-conscious cultivation of “the best that has been thought and said” within our tradition as well as other high civilizations and cultures. High culture is incompatible with indiscriminate relativism. Rather, high culture depends on the recognition that not all social practices are inherently admirable. Not every human being (or even social group, for that matter) is sufficiently cultured or cultivated. That recognition, so disturbing to the politically correct, is surely the beginning of wisdom.

Redefining Culture

T. S. Eliot provides some helpful reflections in the concluding pages of his classic 1948 work, *Notes on the Definition of Culture*. He reminds us that culture worthy of the name is unthinkable without religion, and in the West that means the Christian religion. Christianity helped create a common culture in Europe, since all Europeans (and one might add Westerners more broadly) were profoundly shaped by “the common cultural elements which this common Christianity has brought with it.” Even unbelievers were “Christians” in this broad cultural sense. Eliot strikingly observes that “only a Christian culture could have produced” unbelievers such as Voltaire or Nietzsche. They fought Christianity with a spiritual and intellectual intensity and moral seriousness derived from Christianity itself.

Reminding us of the high spiritual foundations of authentic culture, Eliot comments that Europe is unlikely to “survive the complete disappearance of the Christian faith.” This is what today's radical secularists and multiculturalists fail to perceive. Without fidelity to our best traditions, without deference to the moral law or an order of things above the human will, culture inevitably degenerates into anarchy, the nemesis of true culture. A society dedicated exclusively to rights over duties, subjective preferences over concern for the common good, and a

materialistic “engrossment in everyday life” over spiritual discernment will hardly sustain itself or give rise to a culture worthy of the name. Eliot at least points us to the fact that culture in the high and noble sense of the term has nothing to do with vulgar relativism or a fashionable contempt for religion. The great nineteenth century British cultural critic Matthew Arnold thought culture could somehow survive the decline of religious faith. Eliot had understandable doubts about the durability of this faith in culture as a replacement for faith in God. Culture and religion (and decent politics, I might add) stand or fall together.

Eliot also points out that “the confusion of culture and politics” can point in two problematic directions. A culture that is “intolerant of every culture but its own” can become monstrously tyrannical as the Germany of Hitler did between 1933 and 1945. Respect for cultural pluralism avoids the twin extremes of cultural relativism and a murderous cultural imperialism of the Nazi type. The other mistake is to think that a respect for our common humanity demands “a world state” marked by a single, uniform culture. At the same time, one must respect what is truly universal about the cultivation of the human mind. Once again we are called to reflect seriously about—and do justice to—the “universal” and “particular” dimensions of our common human nature. This is a balancing act that demands great intellectual and moral prudence.

Cultivating Authentic Culture

For their part, the fevered critics of “cultural appropriation” are preoccupied with culture in its most trivial dimensions. They give little thought to the life of the mind or the care of the soul. They promote a crude and angry politics of identity. They are not worthy of serious consideration.

Thomas Sowell reminds us in *Conquests and Culture* (1998) that slavery was a truly “worldwide institution,” entrenched in every culture and every continent for thousands of years. It was the Christian religion that first affirmed the humanity of the slave (see Paul’s Epistle to Philemon). And it was British naval power that put an end to the slave trade and eventually slavery throughout the world. Surely the moral law and the spiritual dignity of man ought to take preference over an entrenched but barbaric cultural practice, even one of great antiquity. There are limits to cultural diversity just as there are limits to the effort to homogenize the political and cultural experience of humankind, to deny the precious variety of nations, cultures, peoples, and political forms. As ever, the challenge is to get the balance right. The virtue of prudence is the one thing most needful here.

We need much greater clarity about the meaning of this sometimes slippery and amorphous word. We would be wise to stop using the word *culture* in ways that undermine respect for the authentic cultivation of the human soul and the human mind. The word must become something of an “absolute” again, not the plaything of sundry moral and cultural relativists.

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Complement with Mahoney’s insight into “soft” totalitarianism, Eric Metaxas on relativism at Yale, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s explanation of Dostoyevsky’s enigmatic phrase “beauty will save the world.”